

Work Review

Off the Wall - passage through the language of tapestries -

Kumiko Namba

Tapestry: 1. A heavy cloth woven with rich, often varicolored designs or scenes usually hung on walls for decoration and sometimes used to cover furniture.

2. Something resembling a tapestry, as in complexity.

Tapestry technique: The colors and shapes of the pattern are indicated in a plan, or preliminary design, of the tapestry called the cartoon. (American Heritage Dictionary)

I have been always aware of the walls in designing my weavings. Walls were the essential and preliminary element as the background to my work. I called my weavings "wall hangings" when I was working in the United States where the word "tapestry" strongly maintains the European heritage, as defined above. When I moved to Japan I started to describe my weavings as "ikat tapestries" even though, strictly speaking, I do not use the tapestry technique in my weaving. It seems that people in Japan whose connection to tapestry is not quite as tangible as peoples' in Western culture, have chosen to call my works "tapestries" and I also have come to accept this ambiguous stance between the wall and my work.

Besides giving my weaving a new classification, this loosening of definitions has resulted in a shift of my attention. By referring to my work as "tapestry" rather than "wall hanging" my impression of the wall became less distinct. As this slight distance between my weaving and the wall started to grow, reflections of the audience began to emerge more clearly within the setting where the walls embrace the work.

In the field of tapestry, I understand visual appeal and recognition is rather more critical than it is for "wall hangings" by comparison. Placing a tapestry against the wall accommodates the audience by presenting within their field of vision a broader awareness of the tapestry as its colors, images and textures enter the eye. In this setting, the wall becomes the backdrop and provides an opportunity for visual communication between the work, as object, and the audience as viewer within this shared context. Here I find an essential language of tapestry.

* NAMBA Kumiko 工芸工業デザイン学科

In the "untitled" piece shown on page 1, I have focused on expressing the energies of color alone. In this weaving, I've encouraged the audience, the viewer, to actually experience the full sense of color, rather than to merely observe it through the forms and patterns. To fulfill my intention, the work was laid out on the floor, or more specifically, the weaving was laid on an acrylic sheet, which was placed on wooden supports 10 cm high to create a visual effect of floating on the floor. At the risk of confusing my audience I have invited them to look at my work in another setting and to re-examine the meaning of tapestry in a different way. Nonetheless, the display of my weaving on the floor was accepted as an effective backdrop much more naturally by others without a lot of controversy. And so I came to realize that it was more my own mind that was bound by the narrow and rigid definition of what a textile is.

Through my work the audience at the other end of our communication has become more clearly positioned in my design process than ever before. I see this new perspective as the welcome result of working among the leading fiber artists at the Okayama Prefectural University. It is here that I have allowed myself to assimilate their fresh expressions and shared sensibilities; to discover more flexible forms, while keeping my allegiance to textile traditions and the techniques of ikat weaving in which I have been engaged through the years.

The world of textiles has been changing fluidly and continuously, as has the fundamental nature of textiles. Since the 1970's, the emergence of fiber-art has created strong winds across the textile scene. It has not only established a new field of its own by bridging fine art and textiles, but has also triggered the re-examination of established textiles including tapestry and ikat weaving. I see here exciting possibilities emerging from within the realm of traditional textiles.